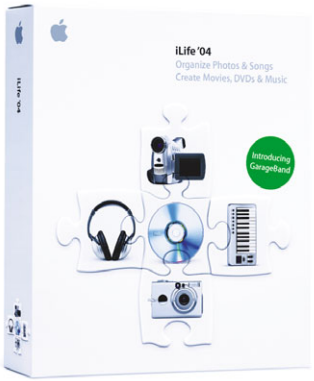
iLife '04



iLife '04
$49 (single computer);
$79 (five-computer Family Pack)
Apple Computer
www.apple.com/ilife

If you bought a Macintosh in the past few years, it came loaded with nifty Mac-only software, including iTunes, iPhoto, iMovie, and perhaps iDVD. Apple has updated those tools, added a new one, and rolled it all into a package called iLife '04.

Previously, three iLife components—iTunes, iPhoto, and iMovie—were available as free downloads. With the introduction of iLife '04, only iTunes is available free; you'll have to buy iLife (or a new Mac) to get the latest versions of the other programs. Free software is great, but it's hard to argue with iLife's $49 price, given the load of new features and speed improvements it brings.

GarageBand

GarageBand is the newest member of the iLife suite, and it's perhaps the one that initially will have many users scratching their heads. The app is a multitrack music editor that lets you create original songs using a library of MIDI instruments, 1,000 music loops, and 200 audio effects.

Depending on your perspective, this might sound incredibly cool or just useless. In the right hands, GarageBand's music sounds great (not like artificial computer-generated music), with realistic-sounding guitars, pianos, drums, and other instruments. You can make music by tinkering with the on-screen piano keyboard, but to really rock out, you will need a USB or MIDI musical keyboard, guitar, or other instrument.

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It's hard to say where GarageBand falls in the spectrum between being a useful music tool and being a toy. A few glaring omissions keep it from being a true musician's tool. To start, it can't export MIDI tracks or show notes in standard musical notation. But it is a sophisticated tool for making music accessible even to people who don't know a sharp from a staff. If you can play an instrument or just have a song in your heart, GarageBand could be your gateway to composing it.

Apple also sells the GarageBand Jam Pack, a $99 add-on that adds 2,000 music loops, 100 instruments, and a gaggle of audio effects. At twice the cost of iLife itself, the Jam Pack is the domain of serious GarageBand enthusiasts.

iPhoto

iPhoto is a marvelous program for storing, cataloging, and manipulating digital pictures. New in this version is the ability to rate photos using a scale from one to five stars. You can then sort photos to see your favorites first. This version also adds Smart Albums, which automatically sort your photos based on their dates, titles, filenames, and other criteria (but unfortunately not EXIF data.) If you want to see the highest-rated photos you've shot with your Canon digicam in the last 90 days, for example, Smart Albums will show you.

In addition, there's a new sepia feature and a Rendezvous sharing feature that lets you view (but not edit) photos stored on other Macs on your network. The ability to rotate and delete pictures used to be irritatingly limited to the thumbnail view. Now you can rotate or remove photos in the full-screen view or even during a slideshow. Slideshows are also improved with new transitions, including a rotating cube and cool flipping mosaic effect, and you can use an iTunes playlist as an accompanying soundtrack.

New features aside, this new version is noticeably faster, especially with large sets of pictures. Apple says iPhoto can now handle up to 25,000 photos in an album. I can't vouch for that, but performance is much better when working with a 1,200-picture album on my 1.25GHz G4.

The rest of iPhoto remains largely unchanged, with plenty of options for printing photos, ordering prints, or creating custom picture books still intact. Like old baggage, some of the irritations of the previous version remain: The publish-to-Web feature is only compatible with the subscription-only .Mac service (that's OK, third-party utilities do a better job), and you can't import only selected images from your digital camera.

iMovie

For editing videos, there's iMovie. Like iPhoto, this new version delivers improved performance, especially when rendering transitions and other effects. A speedy machine helps; my 1.25GHz PowerMac kept me waiting while rendering, and effects could be

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glitchy. Despite these minor problems, the machine was capable enough to make a movie without enormous frustration.

Another notable improvement is timeline editing with nondestructive edits. You can remove a section of video by simply sliding an arrow and then recover it by sliding the arrow back. The program also adds new effects and titles, an audio waveform editor, and alignment guides for meticulous synchronization of audio and video.

Once you complete your movie, the program can launch iDVD so you can burn it for posterity. You can also share movies by publishing it to your .Mac site (once again, it won't upload to other Web servers) or downloading it to a Bluetooth-compatible PDA or mobile phone.

iMovie can't compete with a professional video-editing tool, such as Adobe Premiere, but then again, iMovie is much easier to use. The app hits the mark for a consumer-level video editor; it's easy enough to learn but not so dumbed down that you'll outgrow it in a month.

iDVD

iDVD, the package's DVD-authoring application, is the logical companion to iMovie. You can create a movie and then burn it to DVD. The program's latest version raises the maximum length of a disc from one hour to two, sacrificing video quality if you opt to squeeze in more data.

This version also adds 20 themes for creating handsome navigation menus and a DVD map function that provides an overview of a project, which is useful for organizing a disc's presentation. DVD menus don't have to be static, as many of the included themes have optional motion menus. For example, with tropical fish swimming by or a flashing movie marquee, iDVD can produce a darn nice-looking disc.

A DVD that exploits its full potential means more than just video, so iDVD lets you incorporate audio from iTunes and GarageBand into menus. You can also include DVD-ROM data. Other nice touches include the ability to create slideshow discs and looped movies or slideshows.

Although you can edit a movie project on most Macs, the program can't burn discs unless the Mac has an internal SuperDrive. (Third-party FireWire drives won't work.) The program requires a 733MHz G4 or G5 processor, but it refused to install on my 400MHz G4 with a 1.25GHz upgrade card. I tested it on a 1.25GHz PowerBook G4 instead.

iTunes

iTunes didn't receive an update for iLife '04; its last major upgrade was more than a year ago. Maybe Apple's philosophy (for now) is not to mess with success. iTunes is a fabulous digital jukebox program, unparalleled by anything else on the Mac and (arguably) Windows. With it, you can listen to and organize your music collection, tune in to streaming Internet audio, rip CDs, and burn your own compilations. If you have multiple Macs, you can play songs from networked machines without fuss.

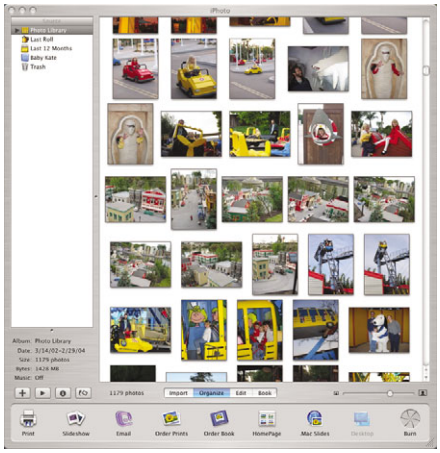
The program is also the gateway to the popular iTunes Music store, which now offers 500,000 downloadable songs from five major record labels, plus hundreds of independent labels. It's not just music, either; audio books and public radio programs have been added to the selection.

Putting It All Together

iLife '04 will definitely not run on your Mac Plus. The suite requires Mac OS 10.2.6 or later, 256MB of memory, and 4.3GBs of space. Most iLife components work with a G3 or later processor. GarageBand requires a G4 for full functionality. You'll need a DVD drive to install GarageBand and iDVD.

iDVD, iMovie, and GarageBand, the most complex programs in the suite, include helpful tutorials to get you started on the right foot. Each application in iLife stands strong on its own, but their integration is the icing on the cake. Working in iMovie, you can incorporate music from iTunes and still shots from iPhoto. You can easily export the songs you create in GarageBand for use in the other applications. ▲

by Kevin Savetz



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